

When I was little my family used to do a lot of outdoor stuff. We camped and swam and water skied in the summer months; but in the cooler months we often went for rides in the country-- that's something my parents used to do to spend time together before they were married, and continued to do when we kids were little. Anyway, one day we had been on a drive to Cherokee Lake, about an hour away from home, and on the way home we stopped at a little airport—not even an *airport*, really, just a small airstrip where some locals kept small planes. My dad knew the owner and we stopped in to say hello.

While we were there the man invited us to take a ride in his plane. My mom and my brother didn't want to go, but I did! Keep in mind that I was maybe 4 or 5 years old—I had no idea of risks or anything like that, I was just excited to go up in the plane.

I remember being in the plane, it was a small two seater with some room for me in the back. I remember it had controls that swung across and that my dad flew the plane for a few minutes. I remember looking out of the window to see the ground below us.

And I remember when we landed jumping out of the plane (or being lifted out maybe) and running to my mom, saying “Mommy! Mommy! I flied like a bird!” (ask me if I've ever lived that one down!)

This might have been what the disciples were thinking as they watched Jesus ascend into the sky, on that day that is remembered in our passage from Acts—that Jesus was flying like a bird. We remember that day as the day of Ascension, the day of Jesus' final disappearance from earth, a poignant scene reminding us that the disciples are losing Jesus for a second time. How hard must it have been, first to face the reality of the crucifixion and death, then the surprise of Jesus showing up among them only to see him disappear into the heavens, not knowing if he would appear again at some point or if this was the end. They must have missed him terribly, this friend and teacher who had been so much to them, who had taught them that a new way was possible.

It is important for us to pay attention to these kinds of stories, these days on the church calendar, because they help us connect to Jesus in a real way. When I read about Jesus leaving the disciples, especially after he had been showing up sort of randomly after his death, I think about how it is when you lose someone you love—either through death, or a breakup of a romance or friendship, or when you become separated from them by distance. You've probably experienced the phenomenon of seeing your friend in the crowd—only when you get closer you realize it isn't them at all but someone who looks like them. Everywhere you go you expect to see them, when you pick up the phone you hope it will be them on the other end. There is a big empty space where that person used to be, even if they are still alive but you've parted ways a hole is left by their absence.

But if we're lucky, as the disciples were, we have many good memories to help us through. In the passages from John we've been reading over the past couple of weeks, along with the disciples we've been spending time with Jesus and hearing his final words to them before the drama of arrest and crucifixion and betrayal takes over. We have overheard these beautiful and meaningful words from Jesus to the disciples before, and now we hear about the disciples in today's passage as Jesus prays for them.

John puts in Jesus' mouth.) But the crux of the matter is that Jesus is asking for something very special for his disciples and all of those who belong to the way of Jesus: he is asking God to gift them with eternal life—such an important thing that we talk about it even to this day. Eternal life. What we hope for from our faith in Jesus, from our living out of God's word and Jesus' actions.

Jesus' definition of eternal life might set us somewhat aback—isn't eternal life just having more life after we die—more seconds and minutes and hours forever and ever amen? According to Jesus here, eternal life is this: knowing God and knowing Jesus.

This is where we'd better be clear about who we believe Jesus Christ to be, and where it becomes important that Jesus is more than a human being. Jesus himself said, before Abraham, *I am*. Jesus the Christ is the Word of God, big W Word of God, who was with God from the beginning, as John tells us at the beginning of his gospel. Jesus the Christ comes out of eternity as God sends him, as God reaches out toward the creation in order to bring Godself to humanity. As we come to faith in Christ we become part of Christ, and we become a part of that eternity. A part of a time beyond time, an existence not bound by time as we know it, where past, present, future, minute second hour, duration and all of those things we think of as elements of "time" become fluid or even are all the same thing or even move into the realm of the spatial. Star Trek fans may be thinking, *ah, the space-time continuum* and perhaps that isn't as far-fetched as it might seem. (re: D. Mark Davis Leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/05/glory-and-giving-that-all-may-be-one.html)

To me, the deity of Christ is *something* in the way that God is *something*, and the Holy Spirit is *something*-- something larger than ourselves and encompassing all matter, energy, consciousness -- and eternal life means that when we die we become a part of that something larger. We go on. This is the message of John to his followers who would read this gospel, the good news: we go on, not temporally, not into the future, but into a present reality that is God in Christ.

The good news of Acts is the same but different: even though Jesus was gone he would continue, and as they received the Spirit of God they would continue. They would continue being his body on earth by sharing stories of his way of being present in the world; by healing as he healed, by having compassion as he had compassion, by standing up for the unloved and unlovable against the powers of darkness—which just happened to be in Jesus' time the power of the Roman empire and the corrupt temple leaders.

This is the legacy we have today—that we who bear witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ have the promise of eternity before us, the promise of God-life that will carry us beyond death. It also means that we who bear this witness must also be present in the world as Jesus was present: by working to heal the broken places in our neighbors and neighborhoods and the larger world. We are meant to feed the hungry, without judgment or any expectation of return. We are meant to heal the sick, even if they are addicts or don't have insurance (or money to buy insurance.) It means we are to stand up for the oppressed against the powers of darkness—whether that darkness is a corrupt incarceration system or an insatiable military-industrial complex that steals food and shelter and hope from our babies and grandparents and ourselves.

After Jesus had prayed for the disciples, he went to his death, willingly and with the courage of conviction that only the Word of God could have. After his ascension the disciples returned to their house where he had appeared to them before, and commenced to praying while they awaited the promised Spirit of God. From there grew a church which is really a body, the body of Christ working in the world, living the way of Jesus, waiting for the surprise of eternity to come. We too wait, living the way of Jesus, confident of what the good news will mean for us. Amen.